

Struggles Over the Expropriation of Urban Space: The Case of Osaka

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Introduction

(1) Neoliberal Urbanism and Revanchist Urbanism

The past few decades of global capitalist development have seen rapid urbanization and the spatial reorganization of inner cities. There has been two interrelated aspects in this global urbanization. The first aspect is neoliberalism. That is, recent urbanization has been spurred on by distinctly neoliberal urban policies, like gentrification, privatization, and large-scale exhibitions, or “mega events.” These urban policies have, on the one hand, concentrated wealth in the hands of a few, while also imposing unemployment and poverty on lower-class workers and minorities. But these marginal groups have also been plagued by another consequence of urbanization. I call this aspect “revanchism.” This concept combines two meanings, that of “taking back lost land” and “revenge.” The first refers to the trend of the violent expulsion of groups like the working poor and homeless from the city through measures like eviction; this trend is driven on by the widespread notion that these groups have “stolen” urban space, especially the inner city. The second meaning of “revanchism” is expressed by the naked hostility displayed towards leftists and minorities, and how that hostility has manifested into heavy-handed and violent urban policies.

These two aspects of urbanization, neoliberal urbanism and revanchist urbanism, are visible trends in urban spaces across the globe. However, we can expect that the way these processes are structured, as well as the conditions they have produced, differ from city to city. Today’s presentation will deal with this theme of global and local, and uses the example of Osaka to explore how neoliberal urbanization and revanchism play out in practice.

(2) The Class Structure of Urban Space and its Restructuring

Post-war Osaka saw rapid urban expansion due to the power of industrialization and suburbanization, due especially to the urban transformation that accompanied the opening of the Japan World Exposition in 1970. This process distributed the benefits of rapid economic development amongst much of the urban population of Osaka, yet also produced new divisions of wealth in the urban geography. This uneven development in Osaka was expressed in the differences between the northern and southern sections of the city. That is, economic and political activity was concentrated in the Naka-no-shima area, located in the traditional north of Osaka. Additionally, there was a great expansion of suburban housing for the expanding middleclass who worked in these jobs, located behind the mercantile hub around Umeda. In contrast

to the development in northern Osaka, the inner-city area of southern Osaka saw the formation of a dense proletarian living space. The geographical center of this area was the Kamagasaki (Yoseba). Kamagasaki became an area for day laborers during the process of urban transformation that came with the 1970 Japan World Expo, and was formed as migrant laborers came to Osaka from farming villages. Into this roughly one square kilometer space were packed over 200 *doya* flop houses, which housed over 30,000 day laborers. Kamagasaki thus became an area where hard labor, exploitation, unstable living, poverty, and other expressions of the myriad contradictions of urban life were concentrated.

The 1970 Japan World Expo was held at the peak of the period of high economic growth. In the decade that followed, a recession spread across the city, and industrialization and suburbanization — the cornerstones of the urbanization project — came to a standstill. By the 1980s, Osaka saw the beginnings neoliberal urbanism. However, this process of neoliberal reorganization was by no means smooth. First, there were advances and setbacks based on the economic climate. Second, neoliberal urbanism faced encountered fierce resistance. The forces of urban development emanating from the north of Osaka collided with that of the proletariat of the south, producing repeated struggles. Below, I will lay out the development of neoliberal urbanism and the resistance it provoked over three time periods. In due course we will see how these resulted in the revanchist city.

1. Struggles Over the Expropriation of Urban Space

(1) The 1980s: Beginnings of Neoliberal Urbanism

In the 1980s, the financial sector and local municipalities undertook policies known as Event Oriented Policy, which consisted of urban development driven by large scale projects, or so-called “mega events.” Holding up as their model the kind of urban space produced for the 1970 World Expo, such Event Oriented Policy sought to transform the entire urban space of Osaka along the lines of the Exhibition grounds. Kansai International Airport, which opened in 1994, was likened to the World Expo grounds as the front door to the city. Additionally, much of the city’s coastal region, which had fallen into disuse due to the shrinking volume of material shipping, was rebranded as “waterfront” property, and saw ever-growing large-scale development. The opening of the Asia-Pacific World Trade Center in 1994 epitomizes the kind of development of this era.

The true spirit of Event Oriented Policy was most visible in the example of Tennoji Park. Following an exhibition held in Tennoji Park in 1987, the entire park was closed to the public for renovations. When it reopened in 1990, the park was now enclosed by a fence and had paid admission. The purpose of these changes was to elevate the image of Tennoji Park as the “Southern Door” to Osaka city proper, which greeted visitors after they arrived in Osaka from Kansai International Airport. The residents of Kamagasaki who had previously used the park – in other words, the day laborers and homeless – were deemed “undesirables” and excluded from the park space. In response to this transformation of Tennoji Park, formal objections were raised, first by the Kamagasaki labor unions and their supporters, then later from a vast segment of the urban population. More than anything else, these objections demanded to know just who the Tennoji Park belonged to.

In this way, the incipient neoliberal urban transformation had met an obstacle in mid-1990s. Osaka was in the midst of a drawn-out recession, and large infrastructure projects driven by public/private

partnerships had resulted in the accumulation of large amounts of debt. Moreover, following the failed 2001 bid to have Osaka host the Olympics, the energy of Event Oriented Policy was forced into an inevitable retreat.

(2) The 2000s: The Strengthening/Advance of Neoliberal Urbanism

Despite these setbacks, however, by the mid-2000s, new life was being breathed into event-based urban development. The timing of this change overlapped with the neoliberal reforms undertaken by the Koizumi administration at the national level. Therefore, Event Oriented Policy which sought profit through urban development, saw a strengthening of its neoliberal characteristics. At the same time, a crucial change had occurred in the Kamagasaki district. Due to the recession of the 1990s, many day laborers were deprived of both work and housing. These workers were scattered to the city's parks and river banks, where they erected tents to live in. Tent villages soon cropped up in parks across the city; these parks subsequently became a space for squatters. With this situation in the background, the forces of neoliberal urbanism met with resistance from squatters throughout the city.

To give a concrete example: in 2006, with the opening of the World Rose Convention, the tent villages of Utsubo Park and Osaka Castle Park, located in the center of the city, were forcibly dismantled. The next year, city authorities took the opportunity of the 2007 World Championships in Athletics to forcibly demolish the tent village in Nagai Park, located in the suburbs in the south of Osaka. In both cases, urban space was rendered safe for large exhibitions under the name of "Park Renovation." These forcible removals led to a storm of protest from the squatters and their supporters. For example, during the forcible removal of the Nagai tent city in 2007, these individuals erected a large stage to voice their indignation.

Yet despite this fierce resistance, the squatters were ultimately expelled from parks across the city. What I'd like to emphasize here is that, the Event Oriented Policy of this era had as its objective the "taking back" park space from the squatters. As mentioned in the beginning, "revanchism" contains the meaning of both "taking back lost land" and "revenge." In this era, we see the "taking back lost land" aspect make its first appearance.

(3) From Neoliberalism to Revanchism

The strengthened neoliberal urbanism of the 2000s has passed through the 2008 financial crises and 3/11 to today, where it is conquering the city with renewed force. The start of the policies of Hashimoto Tōru in particular represent the fulfillment of the past decades of neoliberal urbanism. Hashimoto Tōru has clearly demonstrated his hostility to the left, and has made no attempts to hide his sexism or exclusionism. It is precisely this animosity that reveals the revanchism of neoliberal urbanism. That is, Hashimoto's arrival has brought together the two aspects of revanchist urbanism: the taking back lost land, and vengeance against its enemies. Using heavy-handed measures, Hashimoto has initiated policies to make the city into a competitive corporate body [to run the city like a corporation]; in other words, we have seen the hardening of an entrepreneurial attitude for city governance.

a) Concerning the Status of Public Space in the City

Under the current city government, we have seen an unprecedented push to transform urban space into sources of profit. Hashimoto has introduced the same "Business Improvement District" policies

developed in New York City under Rudolph Giuliani. These policies privilege the operation and administration of public space by joint enterprises among private corporations. Regarding public parks, BID policies have been implemented through a kind of organization called PMO, or Park Management Organization. As a result, the administration of crucial sections of Tennoji Park has been entrusted to Kintetsu Real Estate. Another example is the administration of Osaka Castle Park, which has been entrusted to the Dentsū Corporation. Inside the park grounds, shopping malls have been established one after the other, containing stores like Starbucks. As mentioned in the opening, the Event Oriented Policy initiatives of the 1980s aimed to transform the city scape of Osaka along the lines of the 1970 Japan World Expo grounds. Now, we see the widespread accomplishment of these policies.

b) Concerning the Condition of Kamagasaki

Hand in hand with the aforementioned policies, Hashimoto has developed a program known as “Nishinari Special District Plan” to deal with the Kamagasaki area. In tandem with calls for proposals from various groups to act in a public/private partnership, the city has increased the number of security cameras in the area and executed more forcible removals of squatters from city parks. More than anything else, the goal of this “Nishinari Special District Plan” is to signal that Kamagasaki is now open for development. Under this policy, the likelihood that Kamagasaki will see rapid gentrification has increased dramatically. Recently, a large section of city property touching the Kamagasaki district was thrown onto the market and purchased by the luxury hotel company Hoshino Resorts. When a high-class hotel is established here, it will vastly speed up the gentrification of Kamagasaki. And yet, the voices raised in opposition to this plan have been ever shrinking.

Conclusion

According to the geographer David Harvey, the relative importance of the expropriation of land and property for global capitalism has vastly increased. Harvey calls this “accumulation by dispossession.” The dual characteristics of urbanization identified here, neoliberal urbanism and revanshist urbanism, can be said to be concrete examples of this accumulation by dispossession. Supplementing one another, these two aspects of urbanization have produced a rise in the trend that sees urban space and nothing more than a source of profit. The Osaka of today is fast becoming a space where the existence of the working poor is not permitted. Now, all cities may be said to have their own unique characteristics. For example, we can say that Osaka had a unique trajectory in the fact that the slogan of “Event Oriented Policy” had been raised as early as the 1980s, and that through different twists and turns large-scale events kept occurring until today. The process of urbanization in a particular city can play out in many ways based on its unique social and historical context. To understand the movements of global capitalism, it is essential that we remain aware of such regional peculiarities while also paying attention to the similarities shared by cities across the globe. In Japan today, under the climate of an ever-shrinking opposition to the forces of dispossession and the waning of a once-critical urban studies, it is more important than ever to take such a global and local view.

translated by Michael Abele (Ph.D.)